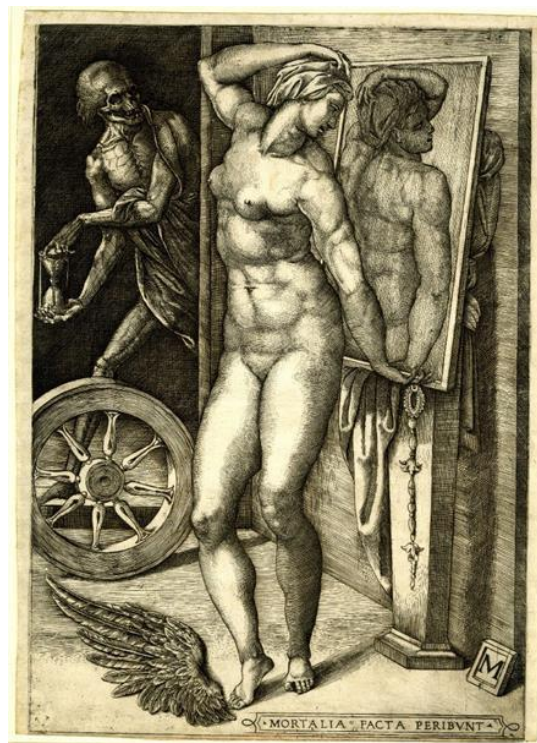


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Madonna, Whore: Exploring the Dualism in Social Perceptions of Female Sexuality

A young woman stands in front of a mirror admiring her naked form. Too engrossed in sensual self-worship, she is unaware that a skeletal figure, Death, peers at her from the corner, holding an hourglass in his hands. At her feet lies a wing and to her left—a wheel. This description is of *Mortalia Facta Peribunt*, also titled *Made Mortal They Must Die* or *Death Surprising a Woman*, a print of an engraving housed in the Blanton Museum of Art.

The engraving was created by an anonymous Italian artist working under the pseudonym “Monogrammist



Mortalia Facta Peribunt by Monogrammist M

M”. The Blanton Museum claims this unknown artist was active between 1500 and 1550 and that the engraving was created in the 16th century during the Italian Renaissance, possibly between 1500 and 1525. What is most striking about this piece is the juxtaposition of life and death. The woman depicted in the engraving has accumulated both fame (the wing) and fortune (the wheel) by using her sensual body (“*Mortalia Facta Peribunt*”), yet she has been condemned by Death. The hourglass symbolizes her mortality. Being in tune with her sexuality and using it for personal gain has made her a target.

This woman’s tragic situation reveals an important societal paradox. Though women are given a platform on which to use their sexuality as a means of gaining popularity, power, prestige, wealth, affection, or any combination of those elements, they may also face criticism

and ostracism from the same society that encouraged their sexual expression. Female sexuality has consistently been a target of “male admiration and denigration” (Daniluk 54). This dualism stems from the unfortunate, yet unforgettable truth that men dominate society, and thus, women have historically conformed to male needs and desires. Whether its 16th-century Italian court society or contemporary America, women at all eras in history have been forced to express their sexuality in regard to men (Miller and Fowlkes 786), and to the gender roles established by them. Therefore, it is undeniable that female sexuality is “affected by socialization into the female sex role and the subordinate status attached to it” (Miller and Fowlkes 786). But the female sex role is muddled with mixed messages. During the Italian Renaissance, courtesans gained status and riches as sexual companions to highborn or wealthy men, yet were obliged to maintain a façade of decorum and respectability (Bassanese 297). In modern American mass media, “sex sells”, but female celebrities who use their sex appeal to advance their careers are subject to slut-shaming. Whether the artist intended this or not, *Mortalia Facta Peribunt* sends a powerful message about the dualism present in perceptions of female sexuality. Misogynistic societal expectations have created an environment in which women are simultaneously encouraged and discouraged from embracing their sexuality.

The perpetuation of misogynistic societal expectations and the control of female sexuality raises bigger questions on why the expression of female sexuality is such a taboo. The answer is rooted in the biblical account of the origin of man. Some theologians argue that the subordination of women to men is “part of the evil consequences of the Fall” (Davidson 125-126). The making of a woman from a man’s rib supports the idea that women are inferior. The serpent’s temptation of Eve and Eve’s subsequent temptation of Adam has been used to perpetuate the idea that women are “natural wantons” (LeBaron). And thus, controlling female sexuality and demanding

virtue is supposed to protect society from Eve's sinful legacy. However, this patriarchal system of sexual suppression has created sexual dualism. Women are viewed as both virtuous and as wanton pleasure seekers (LeBaron). Men have tried to "eat their cake and have it to" by taking advantage of the pleasures female sexuality can provide, while also expecting purity and modesty.

The pioneer of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, tried to explain this male-driven sexual dichotomy through what he coined as the "madonna-whore complex", a term he used to explain a psychological condition he observed in his male patients that caused them to have difficulties feeling sexual attraction to their wives. The madonna-whore complex "views a female's desirability/licentiousness and purity/maternal goodness as two mutually exclusive traits" ("Madonna-whore complex"). Freud's theory suggests that women who conform to gender norms by being sexually passive ("madonnas") are respected, but not sexually desired; and women who express their sexuality freely ("whores") are disrespected, but privately craved.

The condemnation of a woman who is sexually conscious and/or sexually active, like the woman depicted in *Mortalia Facta Peribunt*, is tied to the impact of the traditional female sex role, i.e., the "madonna" ideal. To understand why the artist used the woman as an example of the perils of sexual vanity, we must discuss the social circumstances of the artist's era. The patriarchal nature of Italian Renaissance society provided women with little to no political and economic rights. Moreover, the Counter-Reformation played a major role in defining the role of a female. Women were viewed as "emblems of Catholic morality", and expected to become devoted wives and mothers (Rosenthal). A woman was expected to model herself on the Virgin Mary, so chastity was the most important virtue of all (Knox 7). The standard of comportment for women was *modestia*—a set of social rules and expectations demanding obedience, decorum,

and restraint (Knox 2). As they lived their lives adhering to strict guidelines imposed on them, women lacked freedom of mind and body, and their identities were “confined within their own domestic fortresses” (Rosenthal).

It is not surprising that any woman who fails to live by society’s rules would be negatively branded. A woman admiring her nakedness in a mirror is clearly no model of chastity and modesty. Such actions would be considered sinful during the artist’s time—a time when sexuality, as every other aspect of life, was dominated by men. Two sexual worlds existed during the Italian Renaissance: the world of marriage and the world of rape, prostitution, and sodomy (LeBaron). Most women passed their lives in the first world, conforming to the “madonna” ideal, as expected of them (LeBaron). Women were not supposed to express their sexuality outside of marriage. However, those who were willing to were eagerly sought after by men, but faced ridicule for not living the life of a proper Renaissance lady. Thus, earning the brand of “whore”. The Italian courtesans, who are an important example of the duality this paper discusses, lived lavishly in Italian high society by using their sex appeal. But no matter how popular, wealthy and refined they attempted to be, they were only putting a “mask of decency on the face of lust” (Bassanese 297) in the eyes of the conservative society where they dwelled.

Fast-forward to the modern era. Many of the expectations that burdened women in the 16th century are still relevant today. Advancements in science and social ideas have led to increases in opportunities for women outside of the home sphere, but also reinforced certain traditional views. Since the late 18th century, a woman’s nature was increasingly tied with her reproductive organs, providing further justifications for the exclusion of women from social and economic roles and their confinement to roles as wives and mothers (Groneman 341). Women are still presumed to have a natural affinity for domesticity, modesty, and passivity (Groneman

341). Yet while these conservative, patriarchal expectations still prevail, we live in an age of hypersexualized media. Educational programs advise adolescents against sexual activity, but “contemporary cultural environments are saturated with images of sexualized female empowerment” (Philpy vi). A review of the successes of courtesans in the 16th century and modern-day sex icons, women who fit into the “whore” ideal, illustrates the contradiction that exists in social perceptions of female sexuality.

Though women are expected to be sexually passive beings, cultural reality does not allow strict conformation to gender norms. If gender roles (which demanded modesty and chastity from women) were truly rigid, how could the woman in *Mortalia Facta Peribunt* have obtained her fame and fortune by taking advantage of her sex appeal? According to gender norms, men are wired to desire sex (Firestone). And in a male-dominated society, women conform to the needs of men. Therefore, society has given women a platform on which to achieve the “whore” ideal and satisfy male sexual desire. In the artist’s era, this platform came in the form of institutionalized prostitution, i.e. courtesanship.

At the end of the 15th century, Rome, as described by Lynne Lawner, “had become one vast brothel” (4). She proposed two reasons for this development: one, men largely outnumbered women and two, the wives of Roman gentleman were not “particularly charming”, so they sought pleasure elsewhere (5). This is a prime example of the madonna-whore complex at work. Men respected and chose demure, innocent women (“madonnas”) as wives, but looked to satisfy their sexual desires in the arms of “whores”. Courtesans emerged at the height of the Italian Renaissance as “ambitious, determined career wom[en]” (Bassanese 295). To gain popularity, a courtesan “assimilated the male-proposed models in fashion, borrowed the man-made idiom of traditional Petrarchism, and composed herself physically and culturally as the erotic projection of male fantasies” (Bassanese 295). Famous courtesans, such as Veronica Franco and Tullia

D'Aragona, provided sexual services and companionship in exchange for a life of luxury and acceptance into sophisticated circles.

Though courted by high-society men and admired by artists, the courtesan was a violation of the ideal Renaissance lady. Yes, they were elegant, witty, and some were even educated, but they were prostitutes. Courtesans who achieved a high level of social respectability and wealth were given the titles “honest” or “honored” to distinguish them from ordinary prostitutes, but the Catholic Church and the legal system made no distinction between them. In 1524, the Venetian senate passed a law that legally defined a prostitute as any woman who had sex with a man outside of marriage and accepted favors and gifts from that man (Robin). In later statutes, prostitutes and courtesans were forbidden from entering a church on religious holidays and from wearing silk, jewels, gold, and silver (Robin). Tullia D'Aragona was one of Venice's most famous courtesans, earning prominence as an intellectual and writer. In 1547, she faced a public scandal when she refused to wear the prostitute's yellow veil, as required of all women in her profession. Along with admirers, courtesans earned detractors. Once the mask of decency fell, courtesans easily became victims of their hidden realities, turning from “diva into leper” (Bassanese 297). No amount of popularity and wealth could gain them full acceptance. In one way or another, society condemns women who defy the traditional role.

In the contemporary era, we do not use yellow veils and discriminatory statutes to denounce women who express their sexuality freely, but the conservative views that inhibited female sexuality in the past are still present in society. Consider the flappers of the 1920s. Increased educational and employment opportunities, the passing of the 19th Amendment, the rise of the automobile, and postwar prosperity were important factors in the emergence of the flapper movement (Spivack). Women had more rights, mobility, leisure time, and disposable income, and felt more empowered to make their own decisions on how to live their lives. Many

women decided to use their newfound freedoms to have fun, think freely, and flaunt their disdain for the conventions of the older generation. With their short skirts, showy makeup, smoking, drinking, and dancing, flappers presented themselves as highly sexualized creatures and symbolized a “revolution in manners and morals” (Hatton 112). Flappers defied the ideal of the stable maternal woman. However, their popularity, sexual sophistication and rejection of traditional values did not prove to be a real threat to the gender status quo. Flappers “remained women who demurred to men”. Their sexuality retained an innocent and youthful quality (Hatton 112). In fact, the flappers’ combination of “daring spirit and youthful innocence” is what made them so attractive to men (Hatton 112).

We have a culture of consumption that is designed to make women pursue the impossible feminine ideal of being sexy, yet innocent. Remnants of the flapper lifestyle—sex, drinking, swearing, music, and dancing—are still popular today, and the market for people and goods that bolster this lifestyle has grown. And thus, the hypersexualized society of today emerged. Our celebrity culture is one where men and women can earn fortunes “selling sex” on television, in films, and in advertisements, but women more often deal with the backlash of sexual exposure. Sex icons have risen during a time where women are still held to the same misogynistic standards that have existed for centuries. Women, such as Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor, and more recently, Scarlet Johansson and Kim Kardashian, have built their careers on their sex appeal. Unlike the woman in *Mortalia Facta Peribunt*, death may not be society’s mode of condemning them, but opposition to female sexual expression has taken on new forms in the age of technology.

Leora Tenenbaum describes the American celebrity scene as a place where women take on a “slutty” persona as a marketing strategy, but in real life, girls who “dress like Miley Cyrus” are belittled and harassed (x). She suggests that the Internet has helped to exacerbate the

contradiction between the behaviors sold to young women and the consequences for them when they embrace these behaviors by providing an effective platform for slut-shaming (Tenenbaum xiv). Slut-shaming, or slut-bashing, is a term that describes the various ways females are criticized for their “real, presumed, or imagined sexuality” (Tenenbaum xv). A well-known example of slut-shaming is the backlash Kim Kardashian faced after posting a nude picture on Instagram in 2016 in honor of International Women’s Day. Kim Kardashian has gained fame and fortune as a sex symbol and fashion icon, known to post revealing pictures of herself on social media. It is her sex appeal that has made her so popular, so why does she still face such severe criticism for it? Just like the courtesans of the Italian Renaissance and the woman depicted in *Mortalia Facta Peribunt*, she has defied society’s model of femininity. Unfortunately, this is how the world works: female sexual liberation clashes with gender stereotypes. With the lack of one sexual standard for everyone, the paradox will continue.

The misogynistic constructions of sexuality rooted in traditional gender roles provide mixed messages on how women should deal with their sexuality. Many women can relate to the dilemma faced by the woman depicted in *Mortalia Facta Peribunt*. We may enjoy the benefits of embracing and expressing our sexuality, but society will be looming in the corner as an unrelenting judge. The courtesans of the 16th-century Italian Renaissance and sex-icons of the modern age are prime examples of women facing both love and hate from a society that demands modesty, but craves sensuality. Even today, young girls are raised to be “madonnas” in a world that idolizes “whores”. For women, interpreting their sexuality is a confusing task. Should I take *Mortalia Facta Peribunt*’s message to heart and withhold expressing my sexuality for fear of condemnation, or should I acknowledge that I can use my sex appeal to get ahead? Should I be a madonna or a whore? This question is invalid because the current policing of female sexuality is

grounded in sexist and ambiguous ideas about femininity. Female sexual autonomy needs to be enforced. We should no longer allow unrealistic expectations to shape our sexual development. Women must continue to challenge the expectations and environments that perpetuate sexual double standards and mixed messages. While we can do little to eradicate traditional gender expectations that are so deeply rooted in human history, we can reduce their societal impact by promoting gender equality in all areas of life.

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